

Pearl Harbor remembered

By FRAN BELL

President Franklin Roosevelt called December 7, 1941, a day that would live in infamy.

It also lives in the memory of Robert D. Ryburn who was on watch as a seaman aboard the battleship, *Oklahoma*, and among the first who saw and heard the shots "heard 'round the world" 47 years ago today.

The ship was docked with other members of the Pacific fleet off Ford Island at Pearl

Harbor.

The Japanese were attacking American ships, marking the beginnings of our involvement in a war that was to last four years.

Reaction ranged from disbelief, including those at Pearl who thought it was just another air raid drill, to rage later in Washington, D.C., when an incensed patriot chopped down four Japanese cherry trees in the Tidal Basin.

According to historians, the installation of radar in Hawaii at the time was new and experimental. Few military personnel were trained to operate it reliably.

The incoming planes were picked up by radar but were not identified because they were thought to be an incoming flight of U.S. Army B-17's.

Bob Ryburn was 19 when he enlisted in the regular Navy and was assigned immediately out of training to the ancient battleship, *Oklahoma*, and for two years before Pearl Harbor had served with its 1400-man crew.

Ryburn was on the Signal Bridge of the ship and he remembers looking at his watch as the first sounds of battle were heard.

"It was two minutes till eight," he recalls, "and we remarked the Army was playing rough today. Earlier the Army had sneak-bombed us with flour bags as part of routine

training."

When Ryburn saw "The Rising Sun" insignia on the fuselage of a dive bomber, he realized it was no game and while reporting the sighting to the officer of deck, he could see torpedoes being dropped a quarter of a mile away and they were headed straight for the *Oklahoma*.

Ryburn describes how he made his way to his battle station on third deck which was considered protective with its four-inch steel construction.

The *Oklahoma* was tied alongside the battleship, *Maryland*, which had received only one bomb.

The *Oklahoma* was less fortunate. Five torpedoes, lethal and incessant, struck the ship in a ten-minute period, causing it to capsize and the crew, who had made valiant efforts to fight back, were forced to leave their battle stations and use their energies to survive.

In this effort hundreds of men moved toward the nearest hatch, pushing the man ahead and pulling the one behind. Ryburn remembers passing through the ship's pharmacy where hundreds of bottles floated on a deck now filling with water and thick oil.

He remembers the man directly behind him did not make it through the hatch.

"Those of us who got outside hung on the side of the ship and the Japs kept strafing us as the

ship went down."

As they jumped into the water, they dived down to escape the burning oil and enemy fire, coming up only to get fresh air.

Ryburn was among the first who swam toward the sister ship *Maryland*, a scant 120 feet away and he says it was the longest swim of his life. It was during this swim he received injury that did not seem serious at the time but continues to be a source of occasional, chronic pain to this day.

A motor launch, on fire and out of control, hit Ryburn lower back, crushing the vertebra and temporarily paralyzing him. He remembers lying on the deck of the *Maryland*, listening to its five-inch guns and wondering how he got there. It was one of the several times that day Bob Ryburn doubts he would live to tell this story.

"Soon I was able to stand and walk," he said. "I walk by the wounded, the burned and the dead. You don't complain."

He was given a pick-up truck, and two Marines with rifles and his orders, as he remembers them, were to "help the wounded, deliver fire extinguishers and be of assistance any way you can ... then pick the dead."

Included were instructions to drive the truck to the airstrip



ROBERT D. RYBURN remembers Pearl Harbor as if it were yesterday. He was a seaman aboard the fated battleship, *OKLAHOMA*, and 400 of his shipmates were lost.

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and abandon it if the Japs attempted a landing.

Ryburn and the Marines worked like robots delivering equipment to the crippled ships, returning with the wounded and the dead. He remembers this as the most physically agonizing part of the experience because he had nothing to eat or drink all day except half a coke.

Exhausted and in pain, Ryburn drove the truck into a sand trap on a golf course and told the Marines to do what they were able to do ... he could go no further.

He collapsed on the steering wheel, ending his part of that infamous day.

"I was still full of sea water, my back hurt and I was realizing how many men must be trapped in my ship. They breathed for a while through air bubbles until the water and oil rose ..."

A total of 400 men on the *Oklahoma* did not survive. Forty-four were wounded.

Rescue efforts continued with their fellow seamen and others listening for the tapping that indicated life somewhere within the hull of the doomed ship. The last man was rescued nine days after the attack and though watch was maintained 48 hours more, no further signs of life were detected. The dead were to remain in their ship for several months before the laborious task of removal was possible.

Ryburn also remembers after the attack hearing the ships

begin to fire at four planes overhead, believing them to be the returning enemy.

Ironically, the planes were our own and flying in from their ship, the *Yorktown*, 200 miles away. It was a poignant part of the tragic day for Americans. All four planes were shot down, not by their enemy but by their own countrymen.

Bob Ryburn remained in the Navy 20 years and seven months. He attained the Navy's respected position of Chief Quartermaster and loved the life of training crews, commissioning ships and varied tasks.

He has been retired from the Navy 20 years and still has the occasional back spasms, the only help being stretch treatments and pain pills.

Bob Ryburn, a frequent visitor to the Destin area over the past six years, has done several other things with his life ... sold insurance and sewer equipment and has also operated his own business in his hometown of Sunrise Beach, Missouri.

If he had his life to live over again, he would still choose to be a Navy man.

As for his ship, the *Oklahoma*, after she was salvaged and relieved of her remaining lifeless crew, she was decommissioned on September 1, 1944, and sold for scrap.

On May 10, 1947, she left Pearl Harbor under tow of two tugs and was lost in a storm at sea, being spared what one seaman called "her final indignity".